

Strategic Communications: Arab Media and the War in Iraq

By Dr. George Emile Irani

Editorial Abstract: Dr. Irani takes a in-depth look at media influence in the first years of the Second Gulf War, examining the messages, strategies, and initial impact on Arab Muslim audiences. He uses systematic observation of influential Arab media coverage and opinion columns to identify the means some key Arabs are using to fuel anti-American sentiments. Finally, he provides recommendations for the future of strategic communications in the Middle East.

The war in Iraq has significantly impacted how Arabs, Muslims, and Americans perceive each other. In turn, these perceptions have impacted both psychological and military operations and the battle for the “hearts and minds,” which the United States Government has waged to gain the sympathy of public opinion in Iraq and the rest of the Arab and Islamic world.

Using the words of Arab-American scholar Edward Said, the media—both Western and Middle Eastern—is hostage to the “clash of ignorance.” American perceptions of the Arabs are defined by deeply ingrained stereotypes that are slowly changing. In his book *The TV Arab*, Jack Shaheen writes that America’s view of the Arabs can be subsumed into “three Bs” of billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers.¹ In contrast, what molds Arabs’ perceptions of America is ignorance of how the political system works in the US. Their perception is also heavily influenced by Hollywood TV serials such as *Bay Watch*, *Sex in the City*, and *The Sopranos*.

This article is the result of a systematic observation of some of the most influential Arab media coverage and opinion columns from the invasion of Iraq until today. The objective is to identify the means that some key Arabs are using to fuel anti-American sentiments around the world. The outcome is providing recommendations for the future of strategic communications in the Middle East.

Classification of the Arab Media

To understand the directions into which public opinion in the Arab world

is being channeled, one must analyze the strategies that the media use in communicating messages, influencing their respondents, and forming the thoughts and knowledge of the ordinary citizen about the surrounding happenings. This article overviews the most evident Arab media strategies and analyzes the intentions—both declared and hidden—in covering and reporting events in Iraq. Specifically, the analysis covers three time periods: a) before the US and coalition forces invasion of Iraq (during the hype leading up to the war); b) during the war and up until the Iraqi elections; and c) after the first Iraqi elections.

Strategies adopted by the Arab media differ from one newspaper (or other media) to another, especially those produced abroad. Except for the Al Jazeera TV news channel (seen to have a wider margin of freedom than other media would normally have), the differences are less noticeable in media issued and published locally. The influence of Arab authoritarian regimes is so pervasive that even independent media outlets will tend to reflect the official line. Just as methods and tones are usually similar, so are information sources. Neither locally or foreign-produced Arab media, however, can be described as being completely independent.

Existing Arab opposition voices tend to be concentrated in a few Arab countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia. In spite of the apparent marginalization of opposition parties and groups by some Arab regimes (except for Lebanon), opposition opinion in these countries is still louder and more visible than those in some Gulf

countries, Sudan, or Morocco. The lack of freedom of most locally produced media explains why they—versus media issued abroad—are broadcasting a uniform or standardized response to world events.

Arab media produced/published abroad can be classified into two main groups:

Description	Example
Totally independent	<i>Al Quds Al Arabi</i> (although some Arab observers have claimed that it was financially dependent upon the former regime of Saddam Hussein)
Funded by Arab states or businesspersons and therefore not completely independent	<i>Al Jazeera TV</i> (a semi-independent visual media outlet that is loyal to its Qatari provider)

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London-based newspapers such as *Al Sharq Al Awsat* and *Al Hayat* are funded by a number of businesspersons who try to take a liberal position towards local issues, but without crossing the line. Al Jazeera TV and Al Quds Al Arabi are the most followed media outlets among Arabs living abroad, even though their preeminence is threatened by the creation and success of the London-based Al

Arabia TV channel. The Arab viewers and listeners of the two US Government-funded media outlets, Al Hurrah TV and Radio Sawa, perceive the purpose is to improve America's image in the Middle East, which has not yet occurred. The reason for the credibility and popularity of Al Jazeera TV and Al Quds Al Arabi is their stand against Arab rulers and regimes, which took place long before the US involvement in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Looking at the Arab media from the days leading up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 through the events that followed their first elections will lead us to some conclusions for Special Operations Forces.

Arab Media Before the War in Iraq

During the period leading to the war, official, semi-official local media, and media produced abroad adopted the stated official positions of their respective governments. Therefore, news items and editorials reflected, to a large extent, policies and viewpoints of Arab leaders towards the situation in Iraq. Although every Arab country was aware of the US Government and American public opinion's anger following the attacks of September 11, 2001, they did not dare to openly challenge the street and support a war in Iraq.

The Arab media clearly had an unplanned consensus against an American invasion of Iraq. (The persistence was largely due to the massive antiwar demonstrations in the streets of several western capitals.) Government-controlled media outlets produced in countries that have bad relations with the US Government, such as Syria, were fiercely aggressive towards the American intervention in Iraq. The fact that the US acted unilaterally, and without the support of a United Nations Security Council resolution, gave the media strong grounds upon which to fight.

Arab Media Focus on Saddam Hussein

The apparent consensus in the official Arab media—against US and coalition forces taking military action



April 2005 Newspaper Cartoon.

US President as soldier: "If you are not with us, you are against us."

Islamist insurgent: "If you are not a fundamentalist, you are an infidel."

Iraqi victim: "If you are not a wolf, wolves will devour you. No to Occupation. No to Terrorism." (Abu Mahjoob Creative Productions, used with permission)

against Iraq—was minimal when it came to supporting Saddam Hussein. Indeed, many Arab leaders and opinion makers blamed him for causing the troubles in Iraq. They also repeatedly called on the Iraqi dictator to avoid a probable US military strike by submitting to the United Nations investigation team's conditions in looking for weapons of mass destruction.

News reports and analyses intensely followed the work of the United Nations investigation team in Iraq, as well as the discussions and disagreements between the Iraqi regime and the White House. At the time that antiwar demonstrations were beginning to occur in several European and American cities, voices in the Arab world calling for support of Iraq were awakening the political silence and ensuring public support for Iraq.

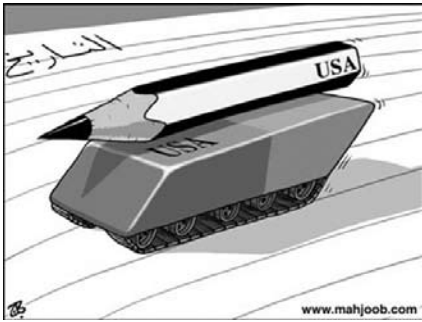
Arab Media Focus on the People of Iraq

To the observer of regional events, it seemed that Arab media in the period before the war had failed to influence the public to the extent that it could become an active player on the political scene. Of course that was seen to be the goal of the official and semi-official media since

Arab governments were not willing to cause public turmoil. Arab regimes were willing to mobilize respective public opinions only to such an extent that it would divert people's attention from the dismal state of the economy and the constant abuses of human rights in their own countries.

If influencing the public was the goal of the official media, why did other so-called independent media follow? In fact, media outlets such as Al Jazeera TV and Al Quds Al Arabi followed the pattern hoping that the public would interpret their message and react accordingly. They were wrong, however, because the public was not concerned with the political focus and Saddam Hussein was never popular except among Palestinians. Al Jazeera TV then created a new strategy that focused on the distress and injustices suffered by the people of Iraq.

Iraq had waged a war with its strong rival Iran for eight dreadful years. It was not long after the Iran-Iraq war ended that Saddam sent his troops to invade another neighboring country, Kuwait, in August 1990. Iraqi troops remained in Kuwait for less than a year before they were driven out by international forces.



January 2006 cartoon showing the US rewriting Iraq's history. (Abu Mahjoob Creative Productions, used with permission)

For the next 11 years, Iraq suffered major losses and was still paying the price for invading Kuwait, by way of the United Nations program that allowed the sale of Iraqi oil to buy food and medicine. Additionally, Iraq had to deal with globally imposed sanctions and an international embargo.

On one hand, an interesting shift took place in the official Arab media. After a constant campaign of blaming the West—especially the US—for all of Iraq's troubles, the media started a fierce campaign against the Iraqi dictator's personal behavior and policies. This shift in tone occurred only after Saddam had rejected calls from several Arab leaders to yield to United Nations orders.

On the other hand, non-official Arab media focused their attention on the suffering of the Iraqi people. From the beginning of the war, few media outlets expressed support for Saddam or considered him to be the legitimate president of Iraq; the most outstanding example was the London-based Al Quds Al Arabi.

Not all Arab media shifted their focus to the Iraqi people, however. Newspapers in many Arabian Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, were striving not to write or mention Iraq as a next-door neighbor. Only Kuwaiti and some Saudi media outlets were ruthless in attacking Saddam and his Baath party, dubbing them "criminals of Iraq." They waged direct attacks against the Iraqi dictator and were critical of his games with the United Nations weapons inspectors. Considering Saddam's brutal invasion of

Kuwait, it was understandable why the Kuwaiti media and other sympathizers would take a more extreme position than some American media in justifying the war against Iraq.

Besides Kuwait and some other Arabian Gulf states, no other Arab media outlet was able or willing to support a military action against Iraq. Arab media seemed to have adopted a completely neutral stand whereby it was implicitly understood that they were, in fact, supporting the war in Iraq. Evidence of such a stand was highlighted by the suspicious silence towards the huge US military build-up in the surrounding Arabian desert.

Arab Media During the War and Until the Iraqi Elections

From the first day of the heavy bombing campaign, which marked the beginning of the war against Iraq, it seemed that most of the official Arab media had forgotten their initial position on the war. News about the battles was reported in a neutral manner. In contrast, a leading Egyptian newspaper published many articles and photos reminding the reader of Saddam's horrifying crimes against his own people. Other newspapers opened their pages to members of the Iraqi opposition, which expressed their support for the arrival of US-led liberation troops to Iraq.

It was only later on, after a week of fighting, that the official media followed the previous line of focusing on and emphasizing the losses and misery of the Iraqi people. In fact, some analysts interpreted it as a message from Arab regimes to their respective people. Their objective was to show how much their people would suffer if they ever thought of taking a helping hand from the US against their own rulers.

Some official media, however, gave mixed signals by posting some articles about "the liberation of Iraq." On the one hand, some Arab leaders would have liked to qualify this media behavior as an example of freedom of speech. On the other hand, some analysts described it as the Arab regimes' predicament vis-à-vis the war in Iraq. It was mostly a problem of regimes not wanting to lose face with the US Government—by openly allowing their official media to criticize American policy—while also wanting to show their public what it really meant to face the same fate as Iraq.

When Saddam appeared on Iraqi television shortly after the assault had begun, he promised fierce resistance to foreign troops and pledged to his people that Iraq would be an American soldier's graveyard, another Vietnam. These statements and the regular media appearances of Saddam's Minister of Information, Mohammed Saied Al



Title of the book being dropped is "Human Rights." (Abu Mahjoob Creative Productions, July 2005, used with permission)

Sahhaf, tried to assure viewers about the steadfastness of Iraqi troops and to dismiss any news about the advance of US-led coalition forces into Iraq.

During the war, the official Arab media began to cheer the Iraqi resistance, slowly at first and then with increased intensity, and to support Saddam and his right to defend his country against foreign aggression. Nonetheless, this did not mean that other voices supporting the invasion of Iraq had completely disappeared. Kuwaiti and Saudi media outlets supported the removal of Saddam and his corrupt regime. Two camps had obviously formed in the media—one group was in favor of the US-led invasion of Iraq and the other openly against it—and they were not confronting each other. Independent and influential media such as Al Quds Al Arabi and the Al Jazeera TV channel, for example, focused on demonstrating ruthless opposition to the war and offering total support to the regime in Iraq.

A few weeks following the start of the war, the media gradually seemed to be getting back to business as usual. Regular and satellite TV channels were constantly showing entertainment programs, contest shows, sports, and reality TV. News reports and analysis from the war in Iraq were given less prominence in several media outlets. This situation created a state of Arab collective unconsciousness and disinterest. Regular Arab viewers, who could not use research to get the relevant information, were forced to become passive viewers.

Arab media outlets published by opposition parties or groups had finally managed to rip away from the official orbit (although different from each other in their views). In general, this kind of media did not enjoy widespread popularity and distribution as it was often limited to small newspapers and a few Web sites on the Internet. Some opposition media declared its full support for



On the fourth anniversary of 9/11. (Abu Mahjoob Creative Productions, September 2005, used with permission)

the Iraqi regime—blaming other Arab countries for the disgraceful lack of responsibility towards Iraq—and others were against the regime, the war, and the international system altogether.

During this period, the oil-coupons scandal suddenly surfaced in the media. Intelligence leaks showed that certain opposition writers, journalists, and influential opinion makers appeared on lists of people who were benefiting from a financial system established by Saddam Hussein. They were being bribed to support and polish the image of the Iraqi dictator, his regime, and his family and to adopt the official Iraqi position.

The general observation was that the official media had followed an unchanging policy during the war. Media published by the opposition had

been bouncing back and forth from one position to another, occasionally blaming the US and at times supporting the forceful removal of Saddam.

Al Qaeda and the War in Iraq

The Arab media—especially the opposition—received the news about a possible linkage between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime with great skepticism and suspicion.

The majority opinion in the Arab street was that the US Government claim linking Saddam Hussein with Osama bin Laden was absurd and a mere lie.

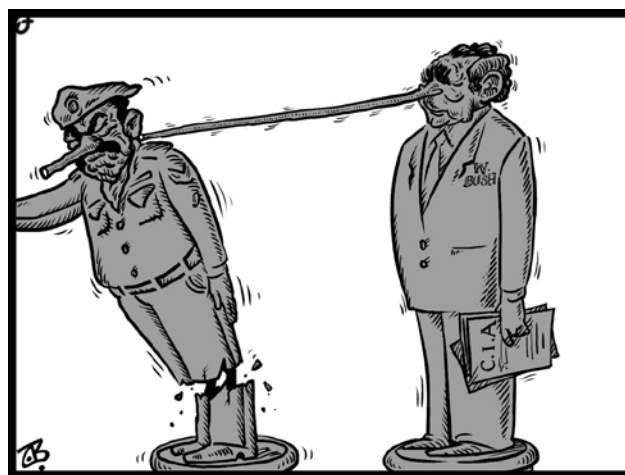
The overall rationale was the basic and irreconcilable difference in the ideologies of the two men. Bin Laden was a natural enemy of Hussein and vice versa.

Some newspapers went even further, accusing Arab leaders of allying themselves with the Americans and Israelis to allow the Mossad and other intelligence services to cook the story against the Arabs. For Arab public opinion, the whole story was an abstract conspiracy aiming to destroy what was left of Arab and Islamic pride.

The Fall of Baghdad

News about the capture of Baghdad, on 9 April, was not a surprise to the public in Europe and the US. It was, however, shocking and disturbing to the Arab viewer. A day after the fall of Baghdad, media reporters and columnists were mostly perplexed, but most of them continued their support to the Iraqi regime, writing about the Iraqi military as if nothing had happened.

Public opinion was profoundly misled by the Iraqi regime's slick propaganda. The ordinary Arab viewer in a country like Egypt had hoped that conquering Baghdad would not happen and many were sure that the notorious Iraqi Special Republican Guards would teach the US a lesson.



July 2003 cartoon used in some leading newspapers. (Abu Mahjoob Creative Productions, used with permission)

TV coverage of US soldiers toppling the big statue of Saddam in central Baghdad brought apparent feelings of shock, anger, and disappointment. Some, however, were pleased to see ordinary Iraqi people spontaneously spit and hit the symbol of ruthlessness and brutality. A few Arab newspapers accused the US Army of staging the scene. Arab journalists criticized western media of biased and unfair reporting by showing off a few Iraqis dancing with joy on television while millions of others were suffering and not allowed to complain.

After the fall of Baghdad, the collapse of the regime and its ability to resist, events were moving too fast for the Arab media to handle. Everything was moving at high speed, and news of the anarchy was more appealing to the average Arab reader than news about politics. Revenge killings were constant, and looting public property occurred for several days. All media outlets at that time were focused on the state of lawlessness in Iraq. Looking to the future of the country, some Arab writers urged the US and its allies to quickly restore law and order and hand over power to the Iraqi people. Their pleas were not heard and went in vain.

As news coverage started to catch up, the focus was on depicting the occupation forces as the only reason behind the chaos. Arab viewers were no longer in shock. To the contrary, it seemed that the public was amused.

The State of Anarchy in Iraq

In the aftermath of the Iraqi regime collapse, sporadic pockets of insurgency emerged. The general belief was that they were members of the former Iraqi police force, military and governmental figures left jobless following Paul Bremer's decision to dismantle all Iraqi services, such as the army and police.

Arab media had been focusing on detailing the state of anarchy and the Iraqi living conditions with shattered infrastructure and lack of legal governmental services. Not surprisingly, the media blamed the coalition forces for not preserving minimum conditions of security and order. Official media in several Arab countries busily posted

articles that showed how miserable the situation could be under a foreign occupation. They used every opportunity to emphasize the belief that Iraqis were actually better off under their former ruler than the present chaos.

Independent media outlets based outside the Arab world were fiercely attacking US Government policy and defining the situation in Iraq as a major failure. It described President George W. Bush as a liar and a dishonest leader that had fooled his own people.

The Iraqi Insurgency

The fall of Baghdad was like a slap in the face for Arab public opinion. Generally most Arabs were hoping to see Iraq become an American graveyard, not because they liked Saddam or cared for the Iraqi people but rather they hated (or to some extent, envied) the US. The insurgency that started to operate with sporadic acts of violence was the public's last hope of humiliating the invaders. Consequently, the Arab media heavily invested in the opportunity.

Most independent Arab media gave moral support to the insurgency in Iraq and praised its deeds against American and coalition forces. At the same time, the official media took a cautious stand in its news reports. Knowing the jihadist Islamist background of the resistance, official Arab media described the events with consideration that these types of heroes were the same people being oppressed and persecuted at home. Slowly official media gave the insurgents a nationalistic dye and tried to justify their cause as resisting a foreign presence in their lands.

The Bombing of Al Jazeera TV Office in Baghdad

On 8 April 2003, the Al Jazeera TV office in Baghdad was hit by a US missile strike. This American military action was definitely a chance for Al Jazeera and all Arab media to get their voice heard around the world. Locally, even



Car bombings confront Iraqi police and Coalition forces in Baghdad. (US Army)

the most skeptical Arab viewers began to express their support and reconsider their stand for the integrity of Al Jazeera and its insistence on providing evidence of conspiracy. The death of Tareq Ayub, the Baghdad bureau chief, provoked an angry reaction throughout the Arab world, even in those countries that considered Al Jazeera to be a disturbing media source operating with a hidden agenda.

It was difficult to find an Arab journalist that did not blame the US for the Tareq Ayub's death. The bombing of Al Jazeera TV reinforced the public consensus that an American conspiracy to destroy Iraq was present.

The Capture of Saddam Hussein

The capture of Saddam on 14 December 2003 was a turning point for much of the Arab-speaking media. The event dashed any unfulfilled hopes of restoring Iraq to where it was before the fall of Saddam. News stories of an old, weak, and tired man getting out of a rat-like hole were humiliating. Many who had previously respected Saddam as a national hero turned their back on him and wished he had taken his own life rather than be caught in such a degrading manner.

Hardline supporters of Saddam claimed that Americans had faked the capture story to destroy his image as an idol to many youth. Others were giving his capture a religious meaning. They portrayed Saddam in the hole as the Prophet Muhammad hiding in a cave to escape the hunt of the infidels. Another story was Saddam getting out of the hole

with the Holy Quran in his right hand. Apart from these immediate reactions to his capture, however, long-term consequences changed the public attitude positively towards the jailed tyrant.

The Trial of Saddam Hussein

Did the Arab media turn Saddam into a hero? Why did he insist on holding the Quran in the courtroom when he never had time to read it? What did his dress attire—Turkish wool suit or the blue caftan (dishdasha)—mean? How did the media react to his behavior?

No one in the Arab media tried to uncover the truth behind Saddam's feverish struggle to associate his image with Islamic heroism. That became clear in the attempts of some Iraqi Islamists to portray him as an Islamic rebel; as previously stated, they even compared him to the Prophet of Islam. Somehow Saddam seemed to be aware, examples being his insistence on holding a large-size Quran during the trial and his attentive insertion of holy verses into his rhetoric.

In the course of his trial in December 2005, Saddam—trying to blow off his critics—wrongly quoted verses from the Quran, which could have hurt the image he was trying to convey as a devout Muslim. He sounded like someone who knew little about Islam. The situation became worse when his former vice president tried to correct his mistake by making yet another. If President George W. Bush had made such a mistake, the

story would have made the front page. As it turned out, no trace of Saddam's snafu was in the Arab media except on a forum—hosted Web site for Arab infidels, who used it as a laughing matter. Most of the Arab media reported on the trial without much hype. Few stressed issues that favored Saddam.

Only the Iraqi media took these matters seriously and expressed strong opinions about the trial. The Iraqi media was also harsh on the first judge, Rizgar Ali, who was accused of being soft on Saddam and other defendants. Saddam and the other accused with him were obviously using every opportunity to either pretend to be the victims of a world-wide conspiracy and portray themselves as historic heroes of Iraq or to simply complain about the treatment and harassment they claimed to be receiving from their American prison guards.

The Arab media was divided into several groups, none of which managed to take a clear position about the trial. The primary reason was that Arabs had mixed feelings towards the deposed Iraqi dictator. Saddam was not a national hero and even those who were striving to show him in a positive light could not ignore his hideous deeds.

The Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal

Nothing has hurt the American image in the Arab public opinion more than the pictures of torture in the Abu Ghraib prison. The Arab media gave widespread coverage of the news with pictures. Some newspapers continued their coverage of this prison scandal for weeks after the facts were released to the public. Al Jazeera TV inserted the images into the banner of one of its most seen programs.

The Elections in Iraq

The Arab public did not understand the elections in Iraq and seemed disinterested in the American

celebration for holding them. Even those that did understand the value of freely choosing government leadership were skeptical about elections held under occupation of a foreign power. The few that believed in American democracy were elated to see the elections occur and succeed despite the challenges. Apart from the Iraqi media, the Arab media gave little focus to public opinion.

Media Manipulation and the Use of Propaganda

In its 4 October 2003 edition, the London newspaper Al Quds Al Arabi related the story of the fall of Baghdad. The editor of the cover page chose a photo that emphasized the nature of the military operation in Iraq as an American occupation of a free country. The Saddam-affiliated newspaper found photos of the broken statues insulting, and another photo with both the American and Iraqi flags on the face of Saddam's statue was deemed to display unnecessary signs of jubilation.

A common method of manipulating a news-report reaction, while at the same time appearing to be objective, is to restructure a news piece. In the story of the Al Hurrah TV journalist killed along with his son, Al Quds Al Arabi told exactly what most media around the world reported with a few differences in the structure. The reader was not told that the journalist's son was also killed until the third paragraph, whereas in most other newspapers, it was already mentioned in the title or at least in the first paragraph.

Another form of manipulation was the deliberate attempt to emphasize some secondary facts and ignore others in reporting the news. This type of manipulation avoids facts that have certain implications on the behavior of the reader—for example, facts that may cause him or her to be critical of the message that the newspaper is trying to communicate. In the Al Quds Al Arabi example, readers did not know what other Iraqi news media reported—that is, that the victim was on his way to attending the Friday prayer and that



America's Statue of Liberty torturing Iraqi victims, May 2004. (Abu Mahjoob Creative Productions, used with permission)

his son was also shot down because he screamed. The newspaper emphasized the fact that the Al Hurrah news channel was funded by the US; this statement was made three times (and one was in the heading paragraph).

Dismissal of Opponents by Linking Them to Icons

The media uses the hatred that many Arabs feel towards the US to discredit opposition arguments. If someone observed something positive about the US, he or she would be linked to the CIA and treated as a paid agent for the American propaganda machine. In the best case, that person would be described as a fool because he was unable to properly read history.

Conclusions

The battle for the hearts and minds of Arab public opinion is a long and arduous undertaking. The synopsis of how the Arab media covers the US intervention in Iraq tells us that a lot needs to be done to win the information battle. The path is fraught with three main obstacles:

a. The fragmented Arab media is a reflection of the regimes and societies from which it emerges. Arab journalists have been striving for honest reporting, but have been unsuccessful given the pervasive control of undemocratic regimes. Those Arab media outlets that opted to move to Europe have been somewhat successful, but remain hostage to their funding sources.

b. The political situation in the Middle East colors the way events are reported. The conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, the war in Iraq, and the summer 2006 war in Lebanon are all events to be considered when attempting to formulate a successful strategy for communication.

c. The US Government and the Bush administration face a daunting task of influencing Arab public opinion; the two US-funded media outlets that were given this task failed. Both Al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa have had a marginal impact on Arab public opinion despite the fact that Arab journalists were hired to manage them.

Barring a major international effort that includes participation by

the United Nations and the European Union to develop lasting solutions to the festering crises of the Middle East—Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon—the Middle East media will mirror cultures that are more involved in a deadly clash than a peaceful embrace. Meanwhile the effort must be made to create opportunities for the US to improve its image within Arab public opinion. A Middle East information task force with membership from academics, journalists, anthropologists, and the US military is needed to develop policy and procedures for improving the image of America. In this regard, information experts of the Special Operations community have much to contribute to a reinvigorated information strategy by virtue of their experience in recent years in two major theaters.

Note

¹ Shaheen, Jack G. *The TV Arab* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, October 1984).

[The author would like to thank Maged Hassanain for his research assistance.] 